

Using National Park Service Museum Collections

The National Park Service has more than 28 million natural science specimens, prehistoric artifacts, ethnographic objects, historic objects, and 11,800 linear feet (l.f.) of archives in the collections of over 300 parks and seven centers in the states and territories of the United States. The articles in this issue of *CRM* present some of the many uses to which the collections are put each year.

Museum collections are each park's natural and cultural resources; they are not something "extra" that is added to a park, but the basic bits and pieces of the park itself. Museum collections are the biology, geology, paleontology, archeology, ethnography, history, and archives of each monument, preserve, historic site, and national recreation area. The only aspect that differentiates them from other resources in the parks is that they can no longer be left *in situ* or they will be lost. Losing park resources is against the law, for visitors as well as for the keepers of the public trust—employees of the National Park Service.

The women sat among the doomed things, turning them over and looking past them and back. This book. My father had it. He liked a book. Pilgrim's Progress. Used to read it. Got his name in it.... Here's a letter my brother wrote the day before he died. Here is an old-time hat. These feathers—never got to use them. No there isn't room.... How can we live without our lives? How can we know it's us without our past?

—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Anyone who has gone through the NPS training in resource management has learned, early on, that we are all resource managers. Those resources include museum objects of all shapes and sizes, of all materials, of all aspects of the natural world, of all aspects of our collective cultural heritage.

So, here we have 14 million cataloged objects and 6,900 l.f. of archives (add an estimated backlog of 14 million objects and 4,900 l.f.

of archives) which we are documenting and storing to be available for future generations. Now that we have them, and know what and where they are (well, we are still working on that), what purpose can they serve other than to document the park resources?

In this issue of *CRM*, there are examples of what we can do with these objects and archives now, and what can be done in the future. We hope these examples will provide readers with inspiration or provocation to begin, or continue, to use collections in a manner that will expand the knowledge of the parks and make the collections more interesting and visible to the public.

The people who have contributed to this issue are front-line keepers of the public trust. They are the curators, museum technicians, and staff with the ancillary duty of collection management, whatever their titles, who have been given (and have accepted) the responsibility of safeguarding, and using, those natural and cultural resources that are now in boxes and cabinets across the country. These are the people who must be involved when park managers need information to make management decisions. These are the **people** who can assist managers by expanding their knowledge of what is already known about a park contained in archives, museum cabinets, and herbariums. These are the curators in the trenches. These are the **people** that should be used as thoroughly as they have indicated that **collections** can be used—used, but not used up!

A collection of articles like this is just the beginning. The examples presented here are only a few of the many ways that collections have been used in the past, and just a hint of how they can be used in the future. Let us know what you are doing. Send additional articles and news items to the Editor, *CRM*, for future publication.

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